

LIFE AFTER DEATH

BY
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“The Day the Spirit and the angels will stand forth in ranks, none shall speak except any who is permitted by (God) Most Gracious, and he will say what is right. That Day will be the sure Reality: therefore whosoever will, let him take a (straight) return to his Lord! Verily We have warned you of a Penalty near- the Day when man will see (the Deeds) which his hands have sent forth, and the Unbelievers will say ‘Woe unto me! Would that I were (mere) dust’”. (Al-Qur’an 78:38-40)

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The Crucial Question

Is there life after death? If so, then what kind of life is it? This crucial question lies beyond the realm of human perception. Our eyes cannot see what lies beyond this earthly life, nor can our ears detect the existence of another world. Nor do we have the physical apparatus to test whether life after death is real. These questions cannot therefore be answered by science which is only concerned with the understanding of phenomena that can be sensed or observed. So any scientist who claims that there is no life after death, makes a statement that is completely unscientific!

Science is not capable of affirming, or indeed denying, the idea of life after death. Until we discover a reliable source through which we can obtain knowledge on this subject, the secular scientist will have to neither believe, nor disbelieve, in life after death!

But should we maintain this uncertain attitude throughout life? Can we afford to remain neutral? In theory, this may seem comfortable but in practice - that is - in confronting the realities of life, our response would be 'definitely not!' Certainly, if we have no direct contact with something, it is understandable that we neither affirm nor deny it. But if something has a direct influence on our daily lives, we simply could not feel comfortable with this attitude. Eventually, our feelings would steer us one way or the other. We are thus unable to stay neutral; we would need to be clear on the matter.

Consider this example: an employer needs to engage a worker and so interviews various people for the post. After the interview, the employer neither trusts them nor considers them dishonest; he neither employs them nor dismisses them. His thinking is neither here nor there. He remains neutral. But this attitude will be damaging to his business interests so he must make a clear decision on the matter. You will agree that such an attitude cannot form the basis of practical dealings in life. The employer must firmly decide for the success of his business. Similarly, we cannot afford to live life in a state of neither acceptance nor denial of life after death. We cannot afford to be neutral as it affects our whole outlook on life. The realities of life force us to decide one way or the other, making our position crystal - clear.

The Significance of Life After Death

A little reflection should help us realise that life after death is not just another philosophical theory, but is something intimately related to our everyday lives. In fact, our whole moral outlook depends on it. If a person believes that there is no life after death, then his attitude and behaviour will reflect this. But a totally different attitude is formed if one believes that his earthly life is followed by an afterlife; a life that is eternal where everyone will be held accountable for all their actions. Not only that but also every thought, emotion and inner secret will be exposed. Thus everyone's ultimate abode in the afterlife will depend on their earthly conduct and its consequences.

Let us try to understand this through an example. There are two travellers who undertake the same journey. The first one travels for his own self-interests. He strives to gain the material benefits of the journey. But the second traveller undertakes the journey for a higher goal - for example - to offer his skills abroad to help those less fortunate. So while the first one is only concerned with himself and his worldly situation, the second traveller strives for the good of others and has his sights set on the long-term benefits of the expedition.

So both are journeying but with different goals in mind. The first one sees the trip as an end in itself, - that is, with no real significance other than satisfying his personal interests. But the second one views it as a means to an end - in other words, as a crucial step that leads to a higher goal. Whatever befalls him on the way is of little concern, what matters is the end result. This is analogous in some ways to one who views this life as a means to acquiring good deeds so that the end result - his afterlife - is fruitful. He has set his sights on a higher goal. He has no care for position and honour in this life since he hopes for an honourable seat in the next world.

Similarly, a person's belief towards life after death will have a decisive influence on his entire moral outlook. Every step he takes in life will be influenced by this attitude. So while one person is swayed to work righteousness to secure the best position in the next life, another will roam about not caring about the consequences of his actions since he sees this life as the only existence. The former travels in one direction while the latter heads down the exact opposite path.

From this, it should be clear that probing the question of life after death is not a fruitless exercise but a valuable one. It penetrates every aspect of our life. We cannot therefore become sceptical or avoid forming an opinion on it. It is therefore essential that we make up our minds about life after death. If science cannot help us here, we must turn to logic and reason.

Where Does Reason Lead To?

If we consider things rationally, where does this lead to? First, let us briefly study man amidst his surroundings to see whether all his needs - physical and moral - are fulfilled. Man is a complex being. He has a body that is composed of various bones, tissue cells and liquids such as water. And the universe around him is also complex and vast. For example, it contains billions of natural phenomena - from the tiny speck of dust particles to the expanse of the galaxies and planets. We find ourselves dazzled by all its spectacular contents - the earth, the oceans, the hills, the waterfalls, the rocks, the fruits, the trees, the minerals - down to the petal on the flower; an endless array of beautiful natural phenomena. All these natural features need a set of laws to govern them. Indeed, these laws already operate within the universe.

So man is a living being who moves and acts of his own free will. He obtains food, drink, clothing and shelter for himself. Similarly, there are a multitude of living entities - whether on land, water or air - which all function within the same universe. Everything is governed by the same natural laws. Man too is affected by these laws which guide and direct his life.

Moral Consideration

We have mentioned the physical aspect of man's existence but more important is the moral component. Man is endowed with the ability to distinguish between good and evil. He can recognise justice from tyranny, truth from falsehood, mercy from cruelty, and so on. He also has the capacity to work good or evil. These are not abstract ideas in his imagination but something, which he encounters in every day life. Therefore, man must not only consider the physical consequences of his actions- such as eating to give him energy- but also the moral consequences.

Now can the full moral consequences of human actions be completely dealt with in this present life? Based on the limited knowledge we have, we can confidently say 'no'. The whole universe is governed by physical laws and the results are clear to the discerning eye. However its moral laws are not so apparent. Consider this example: money is a physical object. It carries both weight and value. Yet truth is a moral virtue but it is not as easily detectable to the human eye. So we can see that physical objects have physical features while moral qualities that work within the dynamics of the universe, are not so obvious.

We also know that sometimes the consequences of man's actions are not in harmony with morality. For instance, a person sets fire to another's house and consequently the house is burnt down. This is the physical result of his action. But morally the criminal should be punished. So there are physical and moral consequences of our actions. But can this life suitably address the consequences of wrong actions? We know that some people cause widespread evil and oppress whole communities. Hitler was such a person. They lead people astray, create wars cause pain and misery. Their wrong deeds have far reaching effects on many generations. Is it possible then, for such tyrants to be punished sufficiently in this life? Even if they were tortured, thrown to the wolves then burnt alive, it would not be sufficient punishment in proportion to their crimes against humanity! Clearly, under the physical laws of this life, such evil conduct goes largely unchecked.

Similarly, the consequences of good deeds are not always suitably rewarded in this world. Consider all those men and women who stand for the truth and call mankind to submit to it-the prophets, martyrs and righteous men and women-would it be possible to reward them sufficiently in this life for their endeavours? Would it be possible to give them a reward of such great portions for the benefits they brought upon countless generations? Their mission led people from darkness to light, from falsehood to truth, from ignorance to knowledge, from captivity to freedom. Often, such people endure continuous personal suffering at the hands of their opponents. Nevertheless, they persevere and move forward with added strength and patience. So can we adequately reward these people within the limited laws of this life?

Based on all this, logic demands that another world must exist. A world where the wrongs of this life are put right for all time; where tyranny is replaced with justice, truth prevails over falsehood and righteousness and virtue are eternally restored and carry more weight than gold and silver. A world where all the consequences of human actions are made absolutely clear. Here, actions are questioned and people are held accountable for their deeds. In this new world, all the consequences of human actions, which were not addressed in the material world, are fully exhibited. Logic also demands that this new world be lasting and not temporarily, that there be eternal happiness and comfort for the virtuous and eternal pain and misery for the wicked. This world operates under perfect justice and immeasurable mercy. And the physical aspects of this afterlife would be completely different to our present physical world. Reason and logic demand that such a world should exist.

The light of the Qur'an

However human reasoning tells us that such an afterlife only ought to exist? But logic alone cannot give us a categorical answer. It is here that divine guidance helps us. It assures us that such a perfect world will be a reality one-day. While our present life may be wrought with injustice and ungodly conduct, the afterlife will deal with every wrong inflicted, and evil conduct will taste the full result of its deeds. Equally, those who worked righteousness will joyfully taste the fruits of their actions and have much more besides. The conditions of people there will last forever, as the new existence will be eternal.

Our present world will one day be demolished in a stroke and replaced by another one very different. The earth will be a new earth which will shine with the light of her Lord. Almighty God will then resurrect every human being and not a single one will find a route of escape. A record of our past deeds will be presented to each of us and we will be told to read it. We will find everything that we did, recorded in it without the slightest error or omission. All the generations of people who suffered from our actions will be witnesses against us and all those generations of people who benefitted from our deeds will be witnesses for us. Every atom's weight of good and evil that we worked, will be made clear to us in this new world. And our limbs, eyes, ears, even our skins will be a witness as to their use or abuse.

Based on this perfect record and evidence that is presented to us in this other world, Allah (God Almighty) The Supreme Sovereign of the universe, will decide each person's case with perfect justice. Then His final judgement will be pronounced. We shall receive either eternal reward or punishment depending on the deeds of our past life. So it will be in this new world, that the reward of our good actions will be of such magnificent proportions where eternal delights and never ending felicity will be the promised lot of the righteousness. Similarly where the punishment is due on a person, it will be meted out in perfect justice and on a scale that we can never imagine! Time and space as we know them will be wholly different so that the bliss of the virtuous will never end and the punishment of the wicked will never diminish nor end.

In, conclusion, just as our present universe exists and operates upon its physical laws and our present world sees its share of good and evil, many of which goes unchecked, then why should another world which corrects the evil and the rewards good , paying us back fully for all our life's actions-a world that knows no death nor fatigue but only eternal life-why should this other world be such an impossibility?

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Recommended Reading!

- The Qur'an & Modern Science By Dr Maurice Bucaille
 - Towards Understanding Islam By S.A.A.Mawdudi
- Available Free on Request from U.K.I.M. Dawah Centre